

Anna Niżegorodcew

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

Supervising Academic Writing: MA Theses and Licentiate Projects *in statu nascendi*

Introduction

This author has had a long experience in supervising academic writing, both MA theses and Licentiate projects. I have been supervising MA theses since 1980 and Licentiate projects since 1993 (see Niżegorodcew 1984; 1995).¹ In this paper I draw first of all on my extensive experience. My aim is threefold, firstly, to present the roles of the supervisor and those of the undergraduate and graduate students in Licentiate and MA seminars; secondly, to present the research questions asked by former and present students; and finally, to discuss the gradual process of forming their new identities as academic community discourse members.

The Roles of the Supervisor and Students in MA and Licentiate Seminars

The role of the supervisor may be either more supportive or more shaping. In other words, the supervisors may be only advisors to students in their more independent research projects, or they may themselves shape students' projects. Students present different views on their own independence in MA and Licentiate project preparation. A short survey carried out among my MA seminar participants in 2008 revealed a considerable diversity of opinions.

According to the respondents, the supervisor should: "serve as a guide," "help students get access to the relevant materials," "offer some help in choosing a proper topic," "help shape one's ideas," "give students a chance to present their ideas," but also the supervisor should "tell them to choose appropriate and

¹ This author has conducted MA seminars at the English Department of the Jagiellonian University since 1980 (ca 80 MA graduates) and Licentiate seminars at the Foreign Language Teacher Training College of the Jagiellonian University (1993–1997), at the Neophilological Department of the Świętokrzyska Pedagogical Academy in Kielce (1996–2000) and at the Centre for Foreign Language Teacher Training and European Education of the Warsaw University (since 1998) (ca 100 Licentiate graduates).

most effective methods of research” and “should not give students too much freedom [...] because it leads to confusion,” as well as “should not allow for too much independence.”

Such a discrepancy of attitudes in one student group is difficult to manage for the supervisor. Some undergraduates are much less willing than others to receive suggestions from the supervisor as far as their areas and methods of research are concerned. In the case of more independent students with strong views about their future projects, the supervisor can find it difficult to play his/her role as a consultant of relevant literature and a guide in the interdisciplinary fields where he/she lacks expertise, such as e.g. using music, arts and computer technology in foreign language teaching. Dealing with cooperative undergraduates, who are willing to develop innovative projects, the supervisor has usually been open to their suggestions. It has been the contrary with uncooperative students, who did not follow the supervisor's suggestions. In their case the supervisor has to impose the area and method of research. In most cases, however, both parties, the supervisor and the undergraduates, negotiate the area of interest and the methodological approach. In later stages of supervision, the supervisor's role usually becomes one of a mentor, who guides the students through their research and the composing process.

The roles that MA and Licentiate students play while conducting their research and composing their projects are simultaneously those of critical readers, researchers and creative teachers. MA theses and Licentiate projects involve critical reading in the preparation of the theoretical background sections. Apart from difficulties in finding relevant literature, undergraduates frequently lack the skill of critical reading. They may assume that the authors of the published materials are *ipso facto* authorities in the discipline. The often make indiscriminate use of Internet sources.

In the case of research projects, MA and Licentiate students frequently lack self-confidence while embarking on the first research study in their lives. They may be self-conscious and afraid to ask the supervisor's advice in procedural matters, such as the research design and method of data analysis.

The question arises how to integrate research design and data analysis in undergraduate education in applied linguistics and EFL teacher training. It seems that in the case of MA and Licentiate projects, the students' completion of the research design as well as its implementation are more feasible with a case study than with large scale quantitative studies. For instance, applied linguistics students can analyse and create parts of syllabuses and teaching and testing materials as well as implement them in the second language classroom.

The third role that MA and Licentiate students play is that of creative teachers, where they can draw on their own teaching experience. Such a role, however, is much easier to play for in-service trainees than for pre-service undergraduates. The latter may draw only on their tutorials or on school teaching practice. Thus, extramural students frequently demonstrate a higher level of awareness than daily students of what questions could be asked in their diploma project research design.

MA Thesis and Licentiate Project Research Questions

In 1995 I wrote:

Both an MA student and his/her supervisor share the responsibility and contribute to the success or partial failure of the project (total failures are very rare). Much depends on the patience, understanding and creativity on the part of the supervisor, and openness, reliability and self-confidence on the part of the student. [...] Both [the supervisor and the undergraduate] should be interested first of all in asking questions and finding ways to try to answer these questions.

(Niżegorodcew 1995: 98)

Let us compare the studies that were conducted only in the first two decades of my MA supervision (see Niżegorodcew 1984; 1995) with those that have been carried out until the present time.

Former studies aimed at comparing teachers' input and learners' output. I was inspired by Krashen's and Long's models of second language acquisition and tried to apply them in MA research studies. The research methods used by students involved collecting classroom discourse samples, both teachers' language and students' language, as well as experimenting with the impact of teachers' L1 and L2 use on students' L2 use.

For instance, Rudnicka (1988) wanted to discover if the teacher's version of a picture story had an impact on the learners' versions and if the L1 version had an interfering effect on the students' output. However, the results of the study did not provide sufficient evidence for the author to claim that there was a causal relationship between the teacher's input and the learners' output.

Formas (1992) wished to discover if her secondary school students acquired more English vocabulary when having access to authentic listening materials in comparison with her other students, who were taught the same vocabulary items by means of more traditional techniques. The tests she administered after the experiment in both the experimental and the control group indicated

better recognition and production of several vocabulary items in the experimental group. The result, however, could be due to the effect of novelty of the teaching technique and not to the comprehensible input included in the self-access materials.

In the 90's Krashen's and Long's SLA models came under strong criticism, which made me look for a different theoretical framework. In consequence, in the following years the projects that were to prove a quantitative impact of L2 input on students' output were replaced by mixed methods research based on action research, frequently carried out by in-service trainee teachers. It seems that a teacher who notices some improvement in her students' results due to her innovative teaching techniques is more justified to draw a conclusion that the improvement was caused by her teaching than a pre-service MA student conducting a limited classroom observation or an experiment. An example of such mixed methods research was Stone's study (1999) on the influence of teachers' use of L1 (Polish) and L2 (English) on the students' listening comprehension in L2 (English). As the author discovered, the influence of the teacher's use of the learners' mother tongue in the L2 class could not be assessed only in terms of comprehension of lexical items but also in terms of the students' confidence and lack of anxiety.

Some of the studies that have been continued aimed at assessing teachers' and learners' L2 and L1 use in the development of communicative competence. They have been motivated by my own interest in different treatments of input for instructed L2 learners (c.f. Niżegorodcew 2007). The research methods used in those studies were focused classroom observation and analyses of teachers' and learners' language samples.

Let us compare two research studies belonging to that category, one conducted by an MA student in the 80's (Kusibab 1984) and the other at the turn of the century (Fryc 2000). I have chosen those two projects in order to compare their aims, research methods and the conclusions their authors and the supervisor reached after their completion. Kusibab's study was written when I was still an inexperienced supervisor, when English as a foreign language (EFL) was taught only in some secondary classrooms and when the Communicative Approach was a methodological novelty in Poland. Sixteen years later I supervised Fryc's research as a much more experienced supervisor and in a very different social and educational context. Since 1990 a dramatic quantitative increase in EFL teaching has taken place and the Communicative Approach has become an approved language teaching method.

The aims of Ewa Kusibab's and of Anna Fryc's projects were similar. Both focused on discovering whether EFL classroom discourse was similar to real communication and, consequently, if it could provide input for L2 acquisition. From the English language teaching perspective, they explored how communicative language teaching was implemented in the Polish classrooms. Both projects were case studies, even though Kusibab observed one classroom and one teacher for a longer period of time and Fryc observed single communicative activities introduced by twenty teachers in different classrooms. The difference in methods of research lies in Kusibab's study being purely qualitative and Fryc's project involving mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative.

The conclusion reached by Ewa Kusibab was that some elements of real communication were present in the observed class due to the teacher's focus on communication in English and the students' high level of motivation to learn English. In their written opinions, both the supervisor and the second reader expressed their satisfaction that the student managed to carry out a genuine piece of classroom research.

Anna Fryc's project was modified a few times under my guidance. The final version provided very interesting classroom discourse data, which gave evidence that so-called communicative activities in the Polish classrooms frequently focused on the completion of the communicative tasks, rather than on their communicative purpose. The teachers' attitude to learners' errors, their use of L1 and L2, as well as their monitoring role varied. More experienced teachers perceived their own responsibility in correcting errors and monitoring learners' language, whereas less experienced ones were satisfied with mere fluency practice, in the sense of "filling time with words" (Fillmore 1979).

In both MA research studies under consideration, in spite of the time gap between them, the students and the supervisor cooperated to answer important questions concerning the state of affairs in English language teaching in Poland in the 80's and nearly twenty years later. The final outcomes of these exploratory studies, that is, samples of teachers' and learners' classroom discourse, which were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the MA students, may serve as data for further analyses in the future.

One more example of an exploratory study is worth mentioning in this context. While spending a year working in Great Britain, Agnieszka Smagiel conducted a quantitative study on a group of young Polish immigrants in Great Britain concerning their attitudes towards the British, their motivation to learn English and their anxiety level while staying and working in the United Kingdom. To assess possible changes in the above characteristics, she used

an attitude survey at the beginning of the subjects' stay in Great Britain and after six months. The results indicate a significant positive change in all the characteristics that were assessed. Smagieł also combined her quantitative research with a qualitative, observational study of two individuals among her subjects (Smagieł 2008).

Apart from the new areas of interest of MA students due to current mobility of Polish people, the MA seminar in applied linguistics has recently become more multicultural owing to the mobility of new participants – native speakers joining the TESOL MA programme. So far eight native speaker students have graduated on the basis of their MA research projects.² Three native speaker students are currently participating in the author's MA seminar in applied linguistics.

Native speaker student supervision is a new challenge for the supervisors. It is not only the question of a much more varied background of the students but also of new areas of interest and different points of view. For instance, a native speaker student is interested not only in how Polish people adapt to living in an English speaking country but also in how educational authorities in English speaking countries adapt to educating Polish children. Another native speaker student is interested in the perception of non-native varieties of English in the United States. Still another native speaker student who has been studying Polish would like to focus on his experiences as a learner of Polish as a second language.

Interesting new MA research projects have been put forward by practitioners (both native and non-native), who wish to apply new methods of teaching English, new technologies (first of all Computer Assisted Language Learning, or CALL) and new classroom techniques in teaching English in different settings. Less desirable are those proposals whose authors have not had any teaching experience yet but they wish to discover the "most efficient" teaching techniques to teach "different types" of learners. Such proposals reveal the naive opinion some beginner MA students hold that learners can be neatly divided into "types" and particular EFL teaching techniques can be easily adapted to match learner types. The supervisor's role is to modify such simplified views.

Another type of recent projects are those that could be called "practical ones." They draw on educational innovations, new examinations and tests, as well as modern information technology. They belong to exploratory projects,

² The projects were supervised by myself, dr Ewa Witalisz and dr Justyna Leśniewska.

in the sense that they rather describe new educational solutions and procedures than evaluate their usefulness in the classroom.

Finally, another type of research projects aims at the development of EFL teaching materials and syllabuses for special courses. Their research methods usually involve students' needs analysis and a pilot action research. Such projects should be the easiest ones for students with some teaching experience. However, they are seldom chosen by pre-service teachers, who are confused by the multiplicity of teaching materials and syllabuses.

The question arises to what extent the supervisor's areas of research and interests should influence MA students' research projects. It seems that MA and Licentiate projects that follow the supervisor's research interests are usually supported by more expertise on the supervisor's part and they may contribute to larger, longitudinal projects (see Nižegorodcew 2007). On the other hand, some students had very strong views about their own preferred areas of research interests and the supervisor was not able to persuade them to focus on anything else. According to one undergraduate, the supervisor "should not suggest his/her own ideas or show preferences based on his/her own interests." In such cases I tried to negotiate the student's area of interest and his/her topic to reach a compromise between the undergraduate's proposed subject and my own current interests. Generally speaking, MA research projects since the 90's have been more supported than shaped by the supervisor, who gradually realized that her own research interests do not necessarily coincide with the MA students' proposals.

Authors of MA Theses and Licentiate Projects: Forming New Identities

After having presented the roles of the supervisor and the students and some of the research questions asked by my former and present graduates, let us discuss the process of being born (*in statu nascendi*) as a graduate. According to Green, postgraduate supervision is a place for intense negotiation of a written product of substantial length, as well as an intense negotiation of identity (Green in Petersen 2007). All three words, *intense*, *negotiation* and *identity* are also worth noticing in our context.

The process of supervision should be *intense*. In other words, the supervisor and the undergraduate should meet a number of times and they should be mutually involved in, firstly, conceptualization of the research question/s, secondly, in designing the whole study, and, thirdly, in conducting the research, analysing

the results and drawing conclusions. Finally, they should also negotiate the written form of the study, that is, an academic thesis or project.

Conceptualization of the research questions and designing of the study has been a common responsibility of the supervisor and the undergraduate, the supervisor usually playing the leading role. On the other hand, conducting the research, analysing its results and the composing process has always been the responsibility of the student, the supervisor playing only the monitoring role.

It should be stressed that there are no clear academic procedures referring to the *negotiation* process between the supervisor and the MA and Licentiate students. The traditional relationship of a master and an apprentice relied on the dependence and subordination of the apprentice. Such a model was also traditionally accepted in the process of being formed as a new scholar. Nowadays students feel much more independent and supervisors tend not to impose their ideas on the undergraduates. It seems that in the field of L2 teacher training and applied linguistics, the model of nondirective supervision has become more popular than the directive one (see Gebhard 1984). It works with some of the more independent students; however, it may be less successful with less independent ones. As has been illustrated above, undergraduates have different approaches to the supervisor's leading role.

Whatever the model of supervision, if MA and Licentiate students are to successfully graduate, they have to become aware of their new status or *identity* as members of an academic discourse community. In the case of applied linguistics, the academic discourse community focuses on academic disciplines which encompass non-native language learning, use and teaching. Although its source disciplines involve such fields as linguistics, psychology, education and communication studies, applied linguistics, including L2 learning, use and teaching, has already attained an autonomous status as a distinct academic field. Successful graduates in the field should *identify* as members of the distinct discourse community. In other words, since some basic assumptions and principles, as well as conventions of academic discourse are necessary in academic interactions, they should have a degree of common knowledge and common discourse conventions of their own field.

Successful supervision should then lead to the identification of MA and Licentiate graduates as entering into the applied linguistics discourse community, with a sense of membership derived from having completed a MA thesis or Licentiate project in the field. Thus, MA theses and Licentiate projects remain indispensable final elements in achieving first and second degree in academic maturity.

Conclusion

Supervising academic writing is a long and difficult process. It takes two years in the case of MA theses and one year with Licentiate projects. Both the supervisor and the students have to determine their most appropriate roles in the process in order to identify research questions, design the study and carry it out. They should also cooperate to negotiate the content and the form of MA theses and Licentiate projects that are to be written. Supervision takes time which is necessary for the undergraduates to form their new identities as members of the academic discourse community. Before they attain it, they are *in statu nascendi*, being born, and the supervisor assists them in the process.

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